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## THE VITALITY OF KHAMS TIBETAN VARIETIES IN WEIXI COUNTY

Hiroyuki Suzuki (IKOS, University of Oslo)

### ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of the multilingual situation of Weixi County, Yunnan Province, in the southeastern Tibetosphere, and discusses the vitality of several Tibetan varieties currently used by Tibetans in Weixi who live alongside Naxi, Lisu, Bai, Yi, and Pumi people. In this borderland area, most Tibetans are multilingual, speaking Lisu and/or Naxi in addition to Yunnanese, a dialect of Mandarin. I focus on two local Tibetan varieties: Gagatang and Tacheng. The former has become endangered, while many speakers still use the latter. Intergenerational transmission of Gagatang appears to be declining, and community attitudes towards the language are increasingly negative, whereas Tacheng Tibetan appears relatively vital, speakers of this variety have strong positive attitudes towards their mother tongue, and generally consider multilingualism to be normal. I identify two factors that contribute to Gagatang's endangerment. First is the local demographic context, where none of the minority languages are supported by the majority of villagers. A second factor is the lack of strong identities attached to local languages. This research suggests that minority languages are more valued in communities that also value ethnic diversity, thus suggesting that a key to maintaining linguistic diversity in the Tibetosphere is the retention of diverse identities.

### KEYWORDS

Khams, language endangerment, language vitality, multilingualism, Tibetan, Yunnan

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INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Weixi Lisu Autonomous County is located in northwestern Yunnan Province, China, and is one of three counties within Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It is located in a contact zone where multiple ethnic groups meet, including Tibetans, Naxi, and Lisu. This area is also in the southeastern corner of the Tibetosphere, i.e., the region under strong Tibetan cultural influence, which more specifically, means the region influenced by the Tibetan language. Weixi is a highly multilingual area, where Lisu, Khams Tibetan, Naxi, Pumi, Malimasa, Bai, and Weixi Chinese are spoken. Locally, minority languages have traditionally been held in high regard with both merchants and villagers speaking multiple languages other than their mother tongue. Though this persists, Chinese influence is growing and minority languages are becoming weaker. Despite this shared sociolinguistic context, the vitality of the ethnic languages in Weixi is not decreasing at the same pace; some now face endangerment while others do not. This paper explores why this disparity exists between the vitality of local minority languages.

I focus on Melung Tibetan, a dialectal subgroup of Khams Tibetan that is spoken mainly in the central area of Weixi. Melung Tibetan, a Tibetic language (Tournadre 2014), has not yet been discussed from the perspective of language endangerment, despite its linguistic peculiarity and value as a data source to both general

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linguistics and Tibetic dialectology (Suzuki and Tshering mTshomo 2009). Furthermore, although the term "minority languages" within the Tibetosphere is generally used to refer to non-Tibetic languages (Roche 2014), it is important to note that many Tibetic varieties currently face endangerment (Suzuki 2012a, 2014a; Suzuki and Sonam Wangmo 2014, 2015). In addition, Melung Tibetan is not counted as a language minority among the ethnic minority languages spoken in Weixi County because of the general view regarding Tibetan as the Tibetan nationality's majority language. However, despite a language status, it may face endangerment under the circumstances of rapid modernization in contemporary society, including schooling, mass-media, and change of social environment and language use.

I will primarily focus on two cases of Melung Tibetan dialects: Gagatang and Tacheng. The situation of these two varieties is completely different. The former has become an endangered variety, while the latter is still used by many speakers. The paper aims to clarify the sociolinguistic context that has resulted in the differing vitalities of these varieties.

The data discussed in this article was collected during eight fieldtrips to Weixi between 2009 and 2014, ranging from four to ten days in duration. I conducted approximately ten interviews with around fifty consultants, ranging in age from their teens to their sixties. I also collected information on the sociolinguistic context of the area through interviews and informal conversation with villagers.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first section contains basic information regarding Weixi County's geography, inhabitants, and languages. Especially since the linguistic situation in Weixi is not widely known, I focus particularly on providing information on the various languages spoken in Weixi. This background is useful to understanding the sociolinguistic context that contributes to the differing vitality of Gagatang and Tagchen Tibetan, which is the subject of the second section of the paper. The discussion in this section deals with language use, speakers' attitude, vitality, and language endangerment. In conclusion, I summarize the findings of

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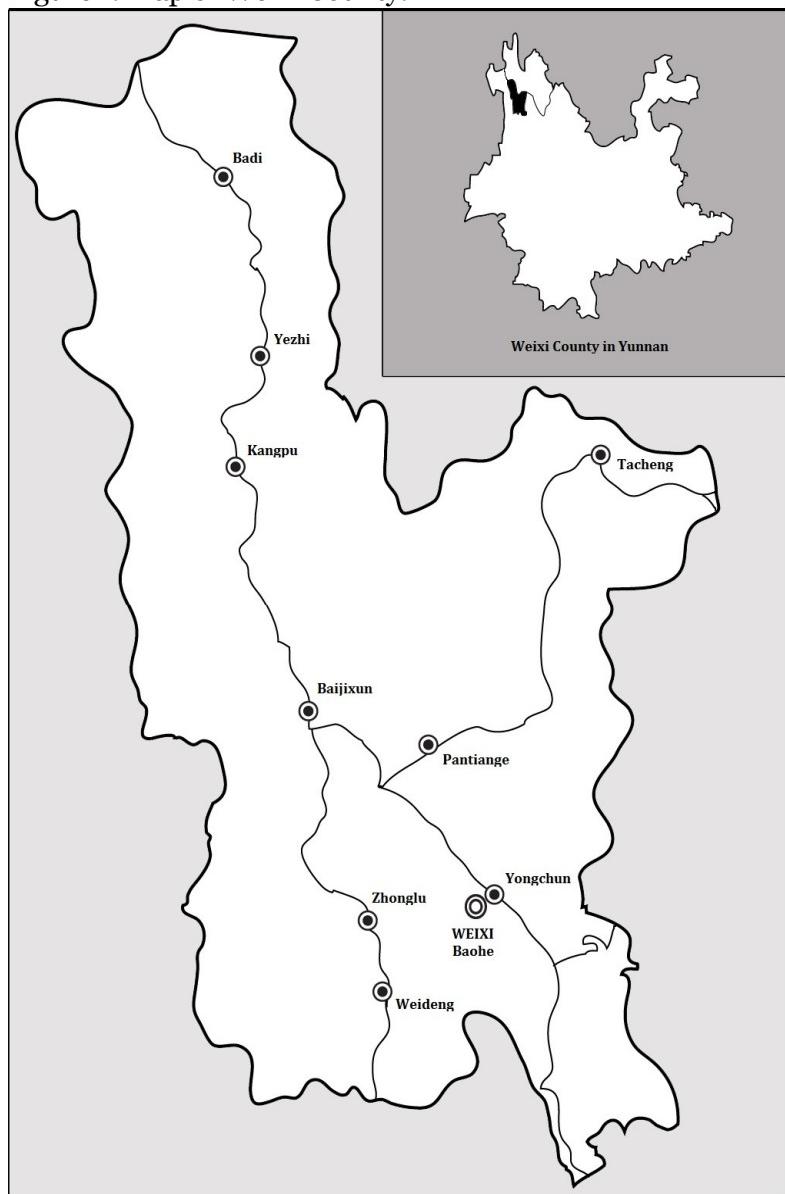
my research and discuss the relationship between language vitality and ethnic identity in the Tibetosphere.

## GEOGRAPHY, ETHNIC GROUPS, AND LANGUAGES

### Geographical Information and Inhabitants

Several ethnic groups inhabit Weixi County. According to Wu (2009:206), the population of Weixi is around 145,000 (in 2005), and consists mainly of Lisu, Naxi, Bai, Tibetan, Han, Yi, and Pumi. The majority of inhabitants live in the area alongside the Lancangjiang (Mekong), Yongchun, and Lapu rivers. The Yunling Range is the watershed between the Mekong and Yongchun in the west and the Lapu River in the east. Most Weixi residents are basically cultivators, keeping domestic animals such as cattle, pigs, and chickens. The Tibetans in this region mainly cultivate rice (Suzuki 2012b). People engaged in a nomadic lifestyle have not been reported.

Figure 1. Map of Weixi County.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Gerald Roche redrew this map based on a map in *Weixi Lisuzu Zizhixian Gaikuang* (2008).

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Weixi Tibetans live primarily in Tacheng Town and Pantiange, and Badi (from east to west) townships. All villages in this area are inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, however, the proportion of each group differs in each village, as are the spoken dialects of each ethnic group. I mainly deal with the north and central areas of this county because the southern area is generally not inhabited by Tibetans.

### Linguistic Overview on the Languages in Weixi

Weixi County is a multiethnic, multilingual area. The area principally inhabited by Tibetans is limited. Traditional toponyms often reflect local languages and in our case, the ethnic and linguistic complexity in Weixi County is obvious regarding this aspect. For example, "Weixi" is a Chinese name created during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (Wu 2009). The area is traditionally known as 'Ba' lung in Literary Tibetan (henceforth LT), whereas it is locally called /me lō/<sup>1</sup> in the northwest Tibetan area of Weixi (around Badi Township) and /ni na/ in the central area (around Tacheng Town and Pantiange Township). The former oral form corresponds to LT, whereas the latter is not of Tibetan origin (though many locals do not know it), but of Naxi origin (Rock 1999:206). In Weixi, even areas that are principally inhabited by Tibetans have non-Tibetan toponyms.

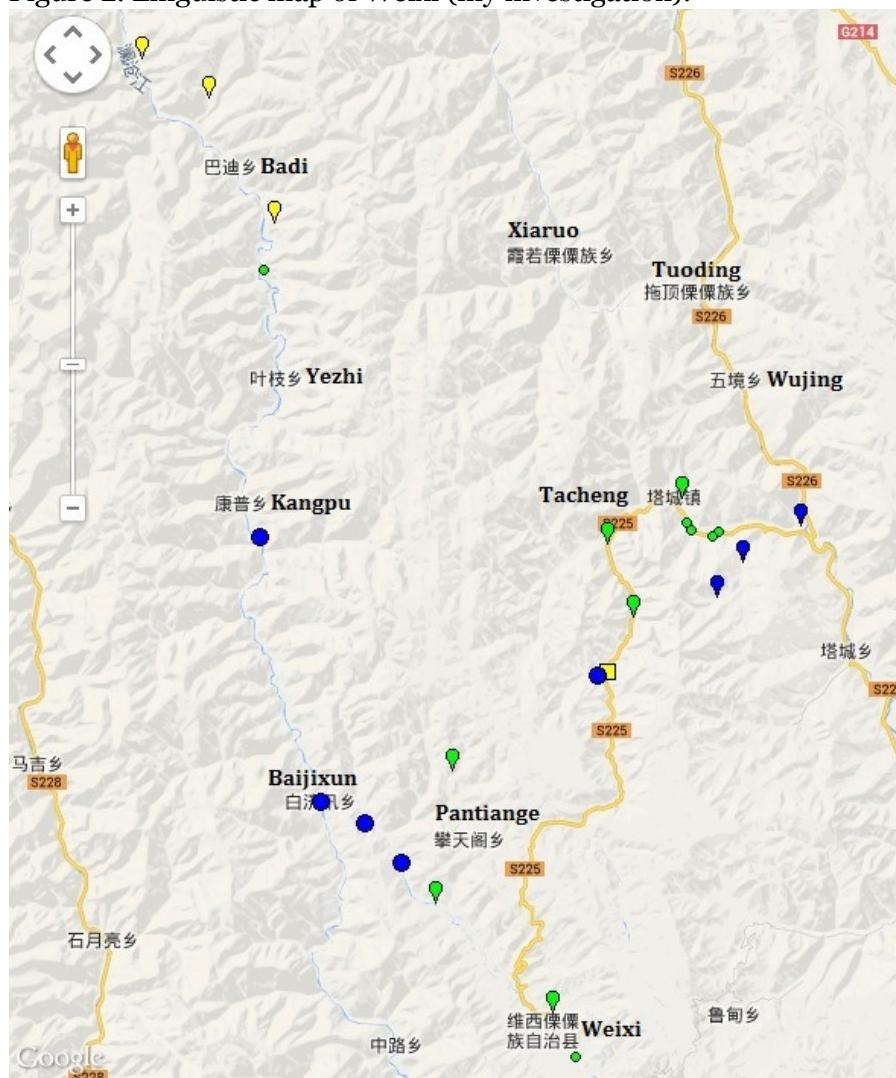
To better understand the sociolinguistic situation in Weixi County, I have intermittently conducted an overview survey of multiple languages spoken in this county for several years, concentrating on a descriptive linguistic study of the Tibetic languages. The following map (Fig. 2), designed with online Geocoding mapping,<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the distribution of languages that I have studied in Weixi County, including Khams Tibetan (divided into three sub-groups), Lisu, Malimasa, and Naxi.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, tone markings are omitted for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>2</sup> <http://ktgis.net/gcode/lonlatmapping.html>, accessed 3 January 2015.

Figure 2. Linguistic map of Weixi (my investigation).



- East Yunling Mountain (Khams)
- Melung (Khams)
- West Yunling Mountain (Khams)
- Lisu
- Malimasa
- Naxi

This discussion mainly focuses on Melung Khams (indicated by ). As shown above, it is surrounded by non-Tibetic languages, such as Lisu, Naxi, and Malimasa. Furthermore, distribution of East Yunling Mountain Khams is close to Melung at the easternmost area of Fig. 2.

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This implies that we need an overall understanding of related languages surrounding Melung in order to discuss its current situation. I shall thus briefly present an overview of these languages spoken in Weixi, including Khams Tibetan, Naxi, Lisu, Malimasa, and Weixi Chinese. None are well-documented. In terms of administrative divisions such as Weixi in this article, statistics and evaluation for language endangerment provided in *Ethnologue* (Lewis, et al. 2015) are not helpful because they are organized according to language, not the administrative units for each language. Furthermore, information on dialectal differences within languages is lacking. For example, the entry on Khams Tibetan (ISO 639-3: khg) provides no statistics based on possible dialectal divisions.

### **Khams Tibetan**

All the Tibetan dialects spoken in Weixi belong to Khams Tibetan. Based on my most recent claim (Suzuki 2013a; see also Table 1 below), there are three subgroups: Melung, East Yunling Mountain, and West Yunling Mountain. The first two subgroups belong to the Sems-kyi-nyila group, and the last one to the sDerong-nJol subgroup. Melung Tibetan is an independent dialectal subgroup of the Sems-kyi-nyila group, which has five subdialectal groups: rGyalthang, East Yunling Mountain, Melung, dNgo, and Lamdo. The last two varieties are spoken in one village or hamlet respectively, located on the boundary of two dialectal groups parallel to the Sems-kyi-nyila group. Melung is mainly spoken within Weixi County. The dialects belonging to the West Yunling Mountain subgroup are spoken in the northwest corner of Weixi County. Badi Township is probably the southernmost area where this subgroup is found. Linguistic features of Melung Tibetan are presented in detail below.

Table 1: Classification of Yunnan Tibetan (based on Suzuki 2013a).<sup>1</sup>

Group	Subgroup	Vernaculars
Sems-kyi-nyila	rGyalthang	rGyalthang, Yangthang
	East Yunling Mountain	Nyishe, Qizong
	Melung	mThachu, Zhollam
	dNgo	dNgo, Phuri
	Lamdo	Lamdo
sDerong-nJol	West Yunling Mountain	nJol, Yungling, Budyl
	sPomtserag	sPomtserag, Shugsum
	mBalhag	mBalhag
	Bodgrong	Bodgrong
	gYagrwa	gYagrwa
Chaphreng	gTorwarong	gTorwarong, sNgonshod

### Naxi

According to He and Jiang (1985), Naxi dialects spoken in Weixi County are classified as belonging to the Lijiangba group. However, we can find local varieties between which speakers have slight difficulty communicating. These may be divided into Tacheng, Yongchun, and Yezhi (from west to east). Most Naxi living in Weixi practise Tibetan Buddhism, and have some competency in Tibetan, especially people living in Tacheng. An overview of Naxi dialects spoken in Weixi is still unavailable.

### Lisu

Lisu dialects spoken in Weixi County are classified as belonging to the Nujiang group (Mu and Sun 2012:12-14). There are, however, many different features between the dialects spoken in the west of Weixi (along the Lancangjiang and Yongchun rivers) and the east (along the Lapu River). This suggests that we can classify Lisu dialects in Weixi into two subgroups. However, the differences do not prevent speakers from communicating. Mu and Sun (2012) provide data on Weixi Lisu,

<sup>1</sup> The data provided in Table 1 is an updated version of Suzuki (2013a).

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but do not specify which dialect is recorded. Compared with my data, the words listed in the vocabulary of Mu and Sun (2012) may be closest to the eastern Weixi (Tacheng) dialect.

### Malimasa

Malimasa is a Naish language spoken by around 1,000 inhabitants in Kenuo, Haini, and Chuanda administrative villages of Tacheng Town. It has two dialectal varieties, one of which is spoken only in Ruke Hamlet. The other is more widespread. Speakers do not belong to a single officially recognized nationality. Some are Naxi, others are Lisu, and others are Tibetan. Local folklore claims that their ancestors were Moso (Na-speaking people) from Muli (Sichuan) and that the autonym Malimasa originates from Muli-Moso. However, all the Malimasa-speaking people do not share this oral tradition. The Lisu Malimasa-speakers especially, do not have such an oral tradition. Short linguistic descriptions of Malimasa are available (Li 2013, Suzuki 2015).

### Weixi Chinese

Weixi Chinese is a member of Yunnanese, Southwest Mandarin (Wu 2007). Characterized by a heavy fricativised pronunciation of narrow vowels among the vernaculars of Yunnanese, it functions as a lingua franca throughout Weixi County. It is used in the central town and in villages for communication between speakers whose mother tongues differ.

Except for recent Han Chinese immigrants, monolingualism is uncommon in Weixi County. Most ethnic minorities are multilingual, and speak Naxi and/or Tibetan in addition to their mother tongue, as well as Weixi Chinese.

### Two Geographical Sites of Melung Tibetan

The dialects belonging to the Melung subgroup are mainly spoken in the central part of Weixi County, distributed in two towns and two townships: Baohe (capital town of Weixi), Yongchun, Pantiange, and

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Tacheng. The Tibetan inhabitants living in the first two are recent immigrants from Tacheng Town and Badi Township in the northwest corner of Weixi County. They immigrated mainly after the establishment of the PRC.

Pantiange Township<sup>1</sup> is located in central Weixi, and has two administrative villages where Tibetan is spoken: Gagatang and Gongnong. The three hamlets in Gagatang inhabited by Tibetans are Gaga, Shaoluo, and Bulu.<sup>2</sup> Gongnong<sup>3</sup> has only one hamlet inhabited by Tibetans.

Shaoluo Hamlet (Fig. 3), the main location of my fieldwork, is situated on a hillside along the Yongchun River. Houses are dispersed among crop fields and thus the population is not very dense within the hamlet. There are no sacred places or religious sites nearby.

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<sup>1</sup> The toponym "Pantiange" is a Naxi name meaning 'plain of fireweeds (*epilobium angustifolium*)'. Most of the area of Pantiange Township is inhabited by Naxi and Lisu, with Tibetans in the minority. However, it also has a local Tibetan name, /pa dɔŋ/ in the Zhollam dialect.

<sup>2</sup> The toponym of the first two hamlets is of Tibetan origin, Gaga, which is a Chinese transcription of the local Tibetan word /ka ka/ 'small'. It should be noted that this word does not exist in a local dialect, but rather in dialects spoken alongside the Lancangjiang from Badi to Deqin, that belong to the West Yunling subgroup of the sDerong-nJol group (Table 1). The local Tibetan name is /mu kʰɔŋ/. *Shaoluo* is the Chinese transcription of the Tibetan word *zhol lam* 'downwards road'.

<sup>3</sup> Gongnong, an isolate Tibetan hamlet in the north of Pantiange, is named according to the Lisu word designating a "plain like the bottom of a pot." Local Tibetans refer to it as /ʰtsə lɔŋ/ in Tibetan (Suzuki 2011a).

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Figure 3. Shaoluo Hamlet (Gagatang).

Tacheng Town<sup>1</sup> in eastern Weixi, bordering Wujing Township of Xianggelila Municipality, is strongly influenced by Tibetan culture. Even the Naxi living there practise Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan inhabitants of Tacheng live in two areas, divided by the Naxi people living in Qibie Administrative Village. The dialect of each area is different. The dialect east of Qibie belongs to the East Yunling Mountain subgroup, known as the Qizong and Bajo dialects, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> The toponym "Tacheng" is of unclear origin. Some say it is the Tibetan *mtha' chu* 'high plain along the river'. Others contend it originates from a Naxi word. Lapu is the ancient name - the same as the river - and may have originated from Naxi or Tibetan *lha phu* or *gla phi* (Karma rGyal mtshan 2002:427-429). In Tacheng Town, several hamlets with a Tibetan name, e.g., Kenuo, corresponding to '*khor lo*' place where the river turns its flow' in LT, and Gedeng, corresponding to *skobs steng* 'place on which concavities exist' in LT. Bazhu 'place where the people from Batang live' is also of Tibetan origin ('*ba'jo* in LT).

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dialects to the west of Qibie belong to the Melung subgroup in three administrative villages: Tacheng (Fig. 4), Kenuo, and Haini.

Within Tacheng Town, I conducted research primarily in three locations along the Lapu River: Gedeng, Geluo, and Yingduwan (Fig. 4). Yingduwan inhabitants live in a small valley between two mountains. Close relationships have formed between inhabitants, for example, there are well-maintained traditional events in which most villagers participate. The mountain to the left in Fig. 4 is worshipped as a deity by villagers. Outside the hamlet, village crop fields exist along the river.

Figure 4. Yingduwan Hamlet (Tacheng).



### Linguistic Overview of the Dialects of the Melung Subgroup

This section describes the situation of language use in the two Melung-spoken areas: Gagatang and Tacheng. This is based on first-hand data obtained through elicitations and observations of language use. I provide an overview of several common but peculiar linguistic features

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of Melung Tibetan before describing the sociolinguistic situation. This section describes the situation of language use in the two Melung-spoken areas: Gagatang and Tacheng. This is based on first-hand data obtained through elicitations and observations of language use. I provide an overview of several common but peculiar linguistic features of Melung Tibetan before describing the sociolinguistic situation.

A linguistic feature distinguishing Melung Tibetan from other subgroups of the Sems-kyi-nyila group is the phonological development of LT *r* in initial and glide positions (Suzuki 2009, 2010, 2011bcd, 2013bc; Suzuki and Tshering mTshomo 2009). The *r*-element in these positions causes a rhotacization, valorization, or pharyngealization of the following vowel without influence on the initial consonant. This type of sound correspondence is extremely rare among the Tibetic languages (Jiang 2002, Zhang 2009), but similar to phenomena attested in Naxi dialects in comparison with proto-Naish (Jacques and Michaud 2011). Because of this peculiar sound development, Melung Tibetan is essentially an unintelligible variety for speakers of other Tibetan dialects, including varieties classified in the Sems-kyi-nyila group. However, other phonetic developments are common to it, which is why Melung Tibetan belongs to the Sems-kyi-nyila group.

Other than the idiosyncrasy mentioned above, certain features are common to almost all varieties of Melung Tibetan, for example, a clear contrast between retroflex plosives and affricates, which has an evident LT origin (Suzuki 2011b, 2013bc); /ma, mA, ma/ for 'this' (no LT etymon); /ɳøŋ/ for a *copulative verb* (LT *snang*) (Suzuki 2012c); and the evidential encoding strategy exhibiting a visual vs. non-visual contrast (Suzuki 2012c). In addition, regarding the numeral system, the word form of "two" is /mə/ (no LT etymon; Suzuki 2014b); the unrounded numbers from twenty to twenty-nine do not require a connector (LT *rtsa*) and are simply formed with "twenty" plus a cardinal number from one to nine. A grammatical sketch of the Zhollam dialect is provided in Suzuki (2011a).

The dialectal difference within Melung Tibetan is somewhat high, and may be divided into two groups: Gagatang and Tacheng.

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Conversations with a context are intelligible, whereas narratives without a context are not.

## LANGUAGE USE IN THE TWO MELUNG-SPEAKING AREAS

I now describe language use in the two Melung-speaking areas, Gagatang and Tacheng, based on information obtained from interviews and elicitations during my fieldwork.

### Gagatang

The area where Gagatang Tibetan is spoken is mainly inhabited by Tibetans, Lisu, and Han Chinese, who each live in separate hamlets where their native languages are dominant. Meanwhile, Chinese has become a lingua franca for communication between different ethnic groups. The number of Tibetan-speaking people is estimated to be less than 800.

Tibetans living in Gagatang have some lifestyle practices that are rare in other Tibetan cultural areas, such as 'pig pastoralism'<sup>1</sup> and burning lands after the harvest in the belief that it makes them more fertile.<sup>2</sup> These customs are common to those of Lisu living in surrounding area as well as along the Lancangjiang. This may imply frequent, robust contact between the two ethnic groups. Tibetans living in Tacheng often mention that the Tibetan dialect spoken in Gagatang has a "Lisu flavor." However, I have not yet found anything linguistically related to Lisu in Tibetan vernaculars spoken there, although the intonation of Gagatang Tibetan is clearly different from that of Tacheng, which may be one of its Lisu-like features.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Locally called /pʰɑ: ntsʰv/ (LT *phag 'tsho*). This expression is absent in other Tibetan areas outside Weixi. Interestingly, this practice is also attested in the Thewo district, the northernmost part of Ruoergai County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan (Kondro Tsering 2012:74-78, 194-198).

<sup>2</sup> Primarily, dry corn plants are burned.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, Lisu dialects spoken on the Tacheng side and the Gagatang side differ in lexical forms, not in the phonological system nor

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prosodic feature is generally not described in a descriptive linguistic way, hence it is nearly impossible to point out its linguistic features in a few words.

The speakers of Gagatang Tibetan are typically conscious that their dialect is a unique variety that is essentially unintelligible outside of the village. The nearest Tibetan community, Gongnong Village, is far to the north<sup>1</sup> of Gagatang. Though the speakers of Gagatang Tibetan generally know of this community's existence, there are very few kinship and other social relations between the inhabitants of the two villages.

Gagatang Village with neither lamas nor monasteries is also distinctive in its lack of formal religious institutions. I was told that there was a local temple before the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but this awaits confirmation. Contemporary annual cultural ceremonies and events lack obvious religious meaning. For example, the New Year celebration is conducted in the same way as Han Chinese Chunjie 'Spring Festival', during which villagers climb the hill on the opposite side of the Yongchun River and burn *bsangs* 'incense'. This might be counted as a religious event, but currently, according to my interviews, it is explained as a traditional custom transmitted from the elder generation. Its religious significance has been lost. Almost all Tibetan inhabitants only possess Chinese names.

No lamas give children Tibetan names. Gagatang Tibetan is not used in any cultural activities or religious ceremonies in the community. The language is used only in daily domestic and subsistence activities. Furthermore, villagers have no access to Written Tibetan.

Observing habitual conversations between local Tibetans, one observes that nouns and even the main verbs in a single sentence are

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prosodic features. The expression "Lisu flavor" may thus indicate a quite similar phonetic phenomenon.

<sup>1</sup> The direct-line distance between Gagatang to Gongnong is around ten kilometers. However, the lack of a direct road between these two locations requires a detour via Pantiange Village. Since contact between Gagatang and Gongnong is rare, Gagatang inhabitants generally describes Gongnong as "a place far to the north."

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borrowed from Chinese. The degree of 'Sinicisation' is thus extremely high in this area. Nevertheless, case markers, verb affixes, and word order remain those of the original Tibetan dialect. Regarding numerals, many younger speakers merely count one to ten in Tibetan and use Chinese numerals for numbers greater than ten.

It is obvious that the speakers of Gagatang Tibetan are gradually losing a sense that it is important to transmit their mother tongue to the next generation. I interviewed four women who were in their twenties from Gagatang who had recently given birth. None of them expressed a wish to transmit Gagatang Tibetan to their children.<sup>1</sup> This situation began with the previous generation, and the four interviewees' parents did not wish to transmit the language to their children. However, because they use Gagatang Tibetan in everyday life, children have gradually acquired it. When Tibetans of the current generation have children, the transmission of the language becomes increasingly precarious. However, Tibetans of the current generation are concerned and some have chosen Tibetan names for their children.

### Tacheng

There are two subgroups of the Sems-kyi-nyila group spoken in Tacheng Town (as an administrative unit), as mentioned above. The description here is principally the case of dialects belonging to the Melung subgroup (henceforth Melung Tibetan). Tacheng Town is mainly inhabited by Tibetans, Naxi, Lisu, and Han Chinese. They generally live in different hamlets, but some villages are inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, particularly those along the main road. Tibetans who speak Melung Tibetan as a mother tongue live in villages where other ethnic languages are also spoken. All Tibetan-speakers live with speakers of other ethnic languages within one village, and are multilingual. However, curiously, the Tibetans do not learn the other Tibetan dialect of the subgroup that is different from their mother tongue. Hence, a conversation between Tibetans from Kenuo and Qizong is generally done in Weixi Chinese. Therefore, the number of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted in 2011.

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Melung Tibetan-speakers living in Tacheng Town approximates the population of Tibetans in the town center, Kenuo, and Haini villages, which can be estimated as 4,000 to 5,000.

The situation in Tacheng Village is complicated in the sense that every ethnic group does not always speak the ethnic language presumed by the ethnic group name. Tibetans use two different dialects of the region: the East Yunling Mountain subgroup spoken in the eastern part of Tacheng, and the Melung subgroup spoken in its western part. Meanwhile, some Naxi and Lisu speak Malimasa, and also speak other ethnic languages such as Naxi, Lisu, and Melung Tibetan. The main part of the town is along the Lapu River, and inhabitants, including Tibetans, usually grow rice.<sup>1</sup> Mutual communication among different ethnic minorities are frequent, thanks to the convenient traffic conditions, but no lingua franca seems to exist. Basically, all the ethnic languages are spoken in habitual conversation among different ethnic groups. However, the use of Weixi Chinese is constantly increasing.

Speakers of Tacheng Tibetan generally accept the uniqueness of their variety, which is basically unintelligible outside of the village. This is probably because they know that all the ethnic minorities in Tacheng have their own language. Even though there are two varieties of Khams Tibetan in Tacheng Town, speakers of each variety recognize great difference between their mother tongues. It is natural for the inhabitants that they speak different varieties.

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the Tibetan dialects including Tacheng have a difference of the word form between "rice plant" and "rice grain," which is rare in the Tibetic languages (Suzuki 2012b).

Figure 5. Naxi locals in a Tibetan Buddhist-style ceremony in Chongke Hamlet (2010).



Figure 6. Tibetans participate in a ritual on the fifteenth day of the New Year in Yingduwan Hamlet (2013).



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Tibetan cultural and religious influence is stronger in Qizong than Tacheng, because Qizong has Damo Zushidong, a famous monastery that both Tibetans and Naxi within Tacheng regularly visit. Their strong religious belief manifests in their rituals, as shown in Fig. 6. It is noteworthy that Qibie Village, a border zone between the two Tibetan dialect subgroups spoken in Tacheng Town, is inhabited mostly by Naxi who practise Tibetan Buddhism (not the Dongba (Tonba) religion, see Fig. 5). Some Naxi also speak a Tibetan that belongs to the East Yunling Mountain group. This situation may be related to their religious affiliation. Because of the circumstances mentioned above, a peculiar phenomenon is observed: when a child is born, Tibetans ask a lama to name the child. Many Tibetans in Tacheng Town also visit the monastery in Qizong, whereas a small number of them ask a local lama for a child's name. The lamas are mainly from Qizong or further east, where the Yunling Mountain East subgroup is spoken, and lamas give their children a name following the pronunciation of that subgroup. Thus, for example, the name Tshe ring in LT is pronounced in two ways: /tsʰə fiəŋ/ (Melung Tibetan) and /tsʰə ri/ (East Yunling Mountain Tibetan). However, most laypeople do not know that these two names have the same origin.

Regarding the use of ethnic languages, the attitude of Tacheng inhabitants towards their own mother tongue is very positive, especially in the case of Malimasa-speakers, who have a strong independent identity. Those who live in Tacheng generally think that the multilingualism is natural and that the peculiarity of their language is easily accepted. This tolerance for linguistic diversity is probably related to the absence of a standard language or dialect within the Melung subgroup. Although the rGyalthang dialect has higher prestige, it is spoken far from Tacheng.

Although each ethnic language in the area has a small number of speakers, none appear endangered. Although the influence of Chinese is steadily increasing, the native speakers of ethnic languages feel that their mother tongue should be transmitted to the next generation, along with other aspects of local cultural heritage. This situation is also supported by Enwall's study (1995:162-164) of the

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written language, in which he mentions the "desire to be unique" and "seeking dissimilarity instead of similarity" as beneficial to supporting language diversity and the vitality of individual languages. The linguistically complex situation in Tacheng Village enables speakers of minority languages to come to know the uniqueness of their mother tongue (Suzuki 2014a).

## CONCLUSION

This article presented an overview of the ethnic languages in Weixi County as part of the Khams Tibetan portion of the Tibetosphere. I then described the sociolinguistic situation of two varieties of Melung Khams, highlighting the varieties' differing vitality.

Weixi is a multiethnic, multilingual area, inhabited mainly by Lisu, Naxi, Bai, Tibetan, Han, Yi, and Pumi. They speak their own ethnic minority languages. Furthermore, they mutually learn several of these languages for habitual communications between different ethnic groups. In this article, I introduced Khams Tibetan (Melung Khams), Naxi, Lisu, Malimasa, and Weixi Chinese. By presenting the linguistic map, I have demonstrated that Melung Khams has two different dialectal areas within Weixi: Gagatang and Tacheng, followed by more detailed sociolinguistic descriptions.

In this regard, Gagatang Tibetan was seen to be a highly endangered variety. Even though there are still 800 speakers, Gagatang Tibetan is used in a highly restricted set of domains and intergenerational transmission appears to be failing, which is a clear sign of endangerment. An important reason for this phenomenon is the negative attitudes of speakers of Gagatang Tibetan towards maintaining their variety over generations. The reasons for such negative attitudes can be summarized as follows:

- Speakers' limited contact with other speakers of Tibetic languages reinforces their impression that the language is isolated and not part of a broader linguistic and cultural identity;

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- Gagatang is a highly Sinicized area and none of the ethnic languages are supported by the majority of villagers;
  - there are no ethnic groups with a strong independent identity; and
  - there are extremely few cultural activities, such as religious practices and a writing tradition in Tibetan that support ethnic identity connected to the Tibetan language.

In contrast, Tacheng Tibetan is much more vigorous, despite its sociolinguistically complex context. The positive attitude of speakers is supported by the following:

- Tacheng Tibetan speakers generally know the degree of the variation of Khams Tibetan because two different dialects are spoken;
- although Tacheng is inhabited by various ethnic groups, inhabitants to some extent maintain the old tradition of learning various minority languages;
- Tacheng Tibetan speakers live with different ethnic groups, one of which is Malimasa, having a strong independent identity, which maintains their own ethnic language; and
- there are cultural sites and activities in the Tacheng Tibetan-spoken area strongly related to Tibetan religious practices that support ethnic identity connected to the Tibetan language.

The situation outlined above, which likely exists in many other Tibetan communities, can mislead speakers of the ethnic minorities' languages to consider these languages to be less valuable for everyday communication. An important question is thus how to remind native speakers of the significance of maintaining a peculiar, unintelligible language to outsiders. Since Melung Tibetan, which is merely "one" subdialectal member of the Tibetic languages, has more than 5,000 speakers, it may be regarded as a non-endangered language. However, Melung Tibetan has many varieties, divided into two mutually unintelligible subgroups. A significant aspect of this diversity, i.e., the existence of different varieties within Melung Tibetan, appears to be

endangered, despite the overall vitality of Melung Tibetan itself. This research suggests that minority languages are more valued in communities that value ethnic diversity, indicating that a key to maintaining linguistic diversity in the Tibetosphere is the retention of diverse identities.

Coincidentally, I was able to begin investigating Gagatang Tibetan, and assess its endangerment. If I had first encountered the case of Tacheng Tibetan, I would not have considered the necessity of an urgent descriptive linguistic study of Melung Tibetan. This emphasizes the great value of having macro-sociolinguistic knowledge of dialectal groups of one language in the study of any group of endangered languages.

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Aba 阿坝 Prefecture

Badi 巴迪 Township

mBalhag, 'ba' lhag ཡ୍ୱାଲ୍ୱାଗ dialectal subgroup/dialect

Baohe 保和 Town

Batang 巴塘 County

Bazhu 巴珠 Hamlet

Bodgrong, bod grong བୋଦ୍ଗ୍ରୋଙ୍ dialectal subgroup/dialect

Budy, 'ba' sdod ཡ୍ୱାଦ୍ୱଦ୍ୱ བୁଦ୍ୟ dialect

Chongke 冲可 Hamlet

Chuanda 川达 Hamlet

Damo Zushidong 达摩祖师洞

Deqin 德钦 County

sDerong-nJol, sde rong dang 'jol གେରୋଙ୍-ନ୍ତୋଲ རେରୋଙ୍ དଙ୍ଗ གྷଜୋଲ dialectal group

Diqing 迪庆 Prefecture

Dongba 东巴 religion

Gaga 嘎嘎 Hamlet

Gagatang 嘎嘎塘 Administrative Village

Gedeng 格登 Hamlet

Geluo 格洛 Hamlet

Gongnong 工农 Hamlet

rGyalthang, rgyal thang ར୍ୱାଲ୍ୱାଙ୍ རାଙ୍ dialectal subgroup/dialect

Haini 海尼 Hamlet

nJol, 'jol གྷଜୋଲ dialect

Kenuo 柯那 Hamlet

Lamdo, la mdo ལାମ୍ଦୋ ལାମ୍ଦୋ dialectal subgroup/dialect

Lapu 腊普 River

Lancangjiang 澜沧江 River

Lijiangba 丽江坝 dialect group

Malimasa 玛丽玛萨 language

Melung, 'ba' lung ཡ୍ୱାଲ୍ୱାଙ୍ རାଙ୍ dialectal subgroup

Muli 木里 County

dNgo, dngo དନ୍ଗ dialectal subgroup/dialect

sNgonshod, sngon shod བ୍ୱାନ୍ୱାଧ୍ୱାଦ୍ བ୍ୱାନ୍ୱାଧ୍ୱାଦ୍ dialect

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|----------------------------------|------|----------------------------|
| Nujiang                          | 怒江   | dialect group              |
| Nyishe, nyi shar                 | 尼日   | dialect                    |
| Pantiange                        | 攀天阁  | Township/Village           |
| Phuri, phar ru                   | 普鲁   | dialect                    |
| sPomtserag, spom rtse rag        | 硕巴楚拉 | dialectal subgroup/dialect |
| Qibie                            | 启别   | Administrative Village     |
| Qizong                           | 其宗   | Hamlet/dialect             |
| Ruke                             | 汝可   | Hamlet                     |
| Ruoergai                         | 若尔盖  | County                     |
| Sems-kyi-nyila, sems kyi nyi zla | 色斯盖  | dialectal group            |
| Shaoluо                          | 勺洛   | Hamlet                     |
| Shugsum, shug gsum               | 疏果   | dialect                    |
| Tacheng                          | 塔城   | Town/ dialect              |
| mThachu, mtha' chu               | 麻竹   | dialect                    |
| Thewo, the bo                    | 热沃   | district                   |
| gTorwarong, gtor ma rong         | 果洛   | dialectal subgroup/dialect |
| Weixi                            | 维西   | County                     |
| Wujing                           | 五境   | Township                   |
| Xianggelila                      | 香格里拉 | Municipality               |
| gYagrwa, g.yag rwa               | 亚加   | dialectal subgroup/dialect |
| Yangthang, yang thang            | 央塘   | dialect                    |
| Yezhi                            | 叶枝   | Township                   |
| Yingduwan                        | 英都湾  | Hamlet                     |
| Yongchun                         | 永春   | River                      |
| Yungling, lung gling             | 云岭   | dialect                    |
| Yunling                          | 云岭   | Mountain Range             |
| Zhollam, zhol lam                | 卓郎   | dialect                    |